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DISCUSSION AND CORRESPONDENCE

W J McGEE¹

WILLIAM JOHN MCGEE, or, as he preferred to be known, W J McGee, was born on a farm at Farley, Dubuque county, Iowa, April 17, 1853, and died of cancer at Washington, D. C., September 8, 1912. He was the son of James and Martha (Anderson) McGee, of Scotch-Irish ancestry, his paternal great-great-grandfather having been Alexander McGee of County Down, Ireland, who emigrated to the United States, while on the maternal side the line leads back to Samuel Anderson, of Irish parentage, who was born at sea in 1740. Both of these grandparents espoused the American cause in the Revolution. In his early years, although large for his age, McGee was frail in health, averse to manual labor, and rather uncertain in disposition; and even in later life, notwithstanding his apparent robustness, he was not so strong physically as was generally supposed.

McGee attended irregularly a county district school, of the kind common to sparsely settled communities, until he was about fourteen years of age, from which time his education was almost entirely the result of intense individual effort, in which he was urged and stimulated by his mother, an excellently well-informed woman, who was anxious that her children should be well educated. The last one apparently to give him formal instruction, in 1867-68, was an elder brother. The boy proved to be an apt pupil, acquiring knowledge with wonderful ease and retaining it in what later developed into a really remarkable memory. These home studies were continued through the years 1867 to 1874, and included Latin, German, and higher mathematics. He also read law, and to a slight extent engaged in justice-court practice. His self-acquired knowledge of mathematics, which included astronomy and surveying, combined with field instruction by a maternal uncle, made him an excellent surveyor, and his services in this capacity were not only much in demand in the neighborhood, but increased his powers of observation during the outdoor work that ultimately led him into the paths of

¹ Much of the information contained in this notice, especially with reference to the early life of Dr McGee, was kindly furnished by Dr F. H. Knowlton, of the United States Geological Survey.

geology and anthropology. Meanwhile, when about twenty years of age, he worked at the forge and became engaged in the manufacture and sale of agricultural implements. In conjunction with an elder brother and a cousin he invented and patented, June 9, 1874, an improved adjustable cultivator, but the device was not a commercial success.

As is well known, McGee's first serious scientific work was in the field of geology. In 1878 he was enrolled as a member of the American Association for the Advancement of Science in affiliation with its section of geology, and in the same year published his first paper on a geological topic. From 1877 to 1881 he prosecuted, as a private enterprise, a topographic and geological survey of an area in northeastern Iowa covering about 12,000 square miles.

It was evidently during this field work that McGee's interest in anthropological research was first aroused. In 1878 appeared his first paper on an anthropological subject—"On the Artificial Mounds of Northeastern Iowa, and the Evidence of the Employment of a Unit of Measurement in their Erection"—an immediate outcome of his geological studies and surveys in the preceding year. At the meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science at St Louis in 1878 he presented a paper "On an Anatomical Peculiarity by which Crania of the Mound Builders may be Distinguished from those of Modern Indians," in which, as in the case of his earlier paper, were presented views that, while characteristic of the period, are untenable in the light of present knowledge but serve to illustrate the great advance made in the elucidation of archeological problems during subsequent years.

McGee's first work under Federal auspices was a report on the building stones of Iowa, prepared for the Tenth Census (1880), published in 1884. This, but more especially his careful work on the multifarious phenomena of glaciation in the upper Mississippi valley, had attracted wide attention, and in July, 1883, when thirty years of age, he was called to the United States Geological Survey by its director, Major J. W. Powell, where for ten years he served as a geologist and performed important scientific work. On June 30, 1893, McGee resigned from the Geological Survey to assume, on the following day, the active charge of the Bureau of American Ethnology, under the directorship of Major Powell, with the title of ethnologist, and a year later his designation was changed to ethnologist-in-charge. During his service with this Bureau, which extended through a decade, he continued active scientific work whenever the pressure of the administrative duties of a Government

office permitted. His most noteworthy undertaking in this direction, which resulted in his most important contribution to anthropology, was a study, during two seasons, of the Seri Indians of Tiburon island in the Gulf of California and of the adjacent coast of Sonora, in 1894 and 1895. With a small party he conducted the only scientific expedition to Tiburon island that had ever been attempted, and prepared a topographic map of the island home of the Seri, but as the Indians fled on the approach of the party, McGee did not come in contact with them on the island, depending for his information on a band employed by a Mexican ranchman near the Sonora coast. The results of these studies formed one of the accompanying papers of the Eighteenth Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology. Subsequently he spent several weeks in northern Lower California, making observations among the Cocopa Indians, but the results were not published. Based chiefly on material gathered by the late J. Owen Dorsey, McGee prepared a memoir on "The Siouan Indians" to serve as an introduction to Dorsey's "Siouan Sociology," both of which papers appear in the Fifteenth Annual Report of the Bureau. Based on a collection of Peruvian trephined skulls collected by Dr M. A. Muñiz, of Peru, McGee prepared, in conjunction with Dr Muñiz, a descriptive paper which was published in the Sixteenth Annual Report of the Bureau, while in the Nineteenth Report he presented a paper on "Primitive Numbers," with the result that Cornell College, in his home state, conferred on him the degree of LL.D. in 1901. McGee's anthropological bibliography alone is an extended one, while his writings on scientific subjects generally are extremely varied and extensive. He resigned from the Bureau of American Ethnology, July 31, 1903, to assume charge of the department of anthropology of the Louisiana Purchase Exposition at St Louis, where he was active also in organizing the World's Congress of Arts and Sciences in 1904, of which he was senior speaker in its department of anthropology. At the close of the exposition he was appointed director of the "St Louis Public Museum," which never developed much more than the name; and in 1907, after spending a period in the Papagueria desert of Sonora and Arizona, he became associated with the Bureau of Soils in the United States Department of Agriculture as an expert in subsoil erosion and subsoil waters, which position he held until the time of his death. Meanwhile he became interested in the conservation movement and was selected as vice-chairman and secretary of the Inland Waterways Commission, of which he was the leading spirit and in whose interest he was the most active worker.

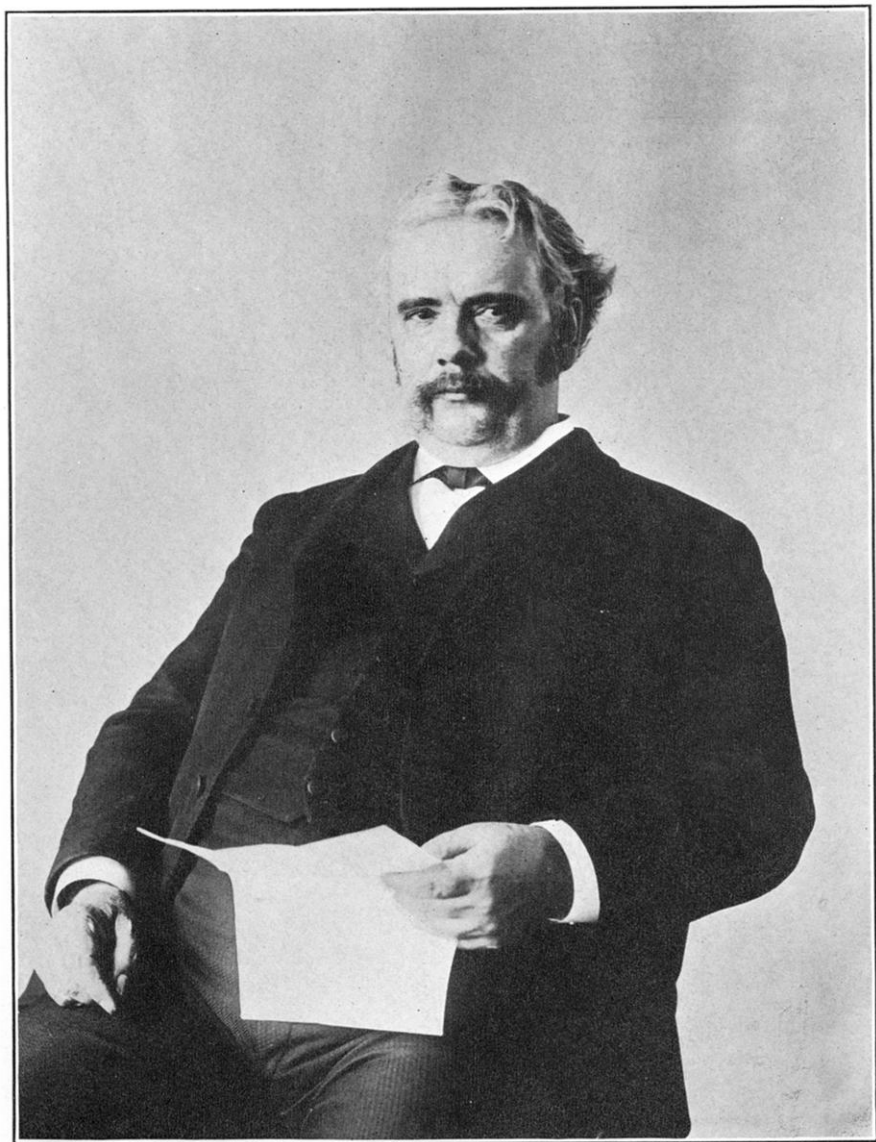
In 1888 he married Anita Newcomb, who, with a son and a daughter, survive him.

McGee was a man of commanding presence, of remarkable mental vitality, ingenuity, and versatility, and of almost fanatical perseverance. He had a personal fondness for the unusual, as his preference in respect to the initials of his given name and his strong liking for the coinage of new terms suggest. But McGee was human withal, and the most generous character, both with his slender purse and his store of knowledge, that any of his host of intimates ever knew. He was sympathetic and helpful, with almost unlimited ambition, and ever ready, whatever the cost, to resent any seeming interference with it. He was remarkably alert and resourceful, as an incident of one of the meetings of the American Association for the Advancement of Science will show. A local divine, mistaking McGee for a fellow minister, invited him to fill his pulpit at a Sunday evening service. McGee, although not affiliated with any church, immediately accepted, and selecting as his text the words "Love ye one another," delivered an address remarkable for its eloquence and replete with human sympathy and understanding.

McGee's interest extended to almost every branch of science, as his constant activities in behalf of and his affiliation with many scientific bodies attest. He became a member of the Anthropological Society of Washington soon after coming to the capital and served as its president from 1898 to 1900. In 1902 he was foremost in the founding of the American Anthropological Association, of which he was elected the first president. When the *American Anthropologist* was established in 1899, McGee became one of the two constructive owners, sharing its financial responsibilities before it came under the control of the American Anthropological Association. The scientific and other learned organizations of which he was an active member are too numerous to list here.

The courage and fortitude so characteristic of McGee in his most active days he did not permit to desert him toward the close of his life. Aware of his fatal malady long before the end, he determined to note carefully the progress of the disease (which first manifested itself in the Sonora desert fourteen years before), in the hope that the interests of learning might be subserved. The result of these observations was published in *Science* shortly after his death. Notwithstanding intense suffering and separation from all his kindred, and with full knowledge of the inevitable, he worked assiduously on the final revision of a scientific memoir which he finished on the eve of the final dissolution.

W J McGee was an unusually remarkable man. It would be a difficult task to appraise now the value of his varied contributions to knowledge, to recall even a tithe of his generousities, or to recount the



W J McGEE — 1853-1912

multitude of his interests. From early manhood he was a strong advocate of the diffusion of knowledge, and his last efforts were devoted to this lifelong purpose. The following is an extract from his will:

"Pursuant to an intention fixed in early manhood on learning that a certain State provided by law that medical graduates should have had dissecting-room experience, and yet made so little provision for the requisite subjects; and conformably with the shocking economic waste represented by the cities of the dead in the long-settled portions of the country; and in accordance with my custom of devoting my efforts and myself to the public good, I give and bequeath my body for purposes of dissection to any medical college selected by my executor."

F. W. H.

ROBERT FLETCHER

DR ROBERT FLETCHER, one of the founders of the Anthropological Society of Washington in February, 1879, died at Washington, November 8, 1912.

Dr Fletcher was born in Bristol, England, March 6, 1823, and therefore was in his ninetieth year at the time of his death. His father, also named Robert Fletcher, was an attorney; his mother was Esther Wall. Dr Fletcher was educated at private schools and later studied law for two years in his father's office. He then turned his attention to medicine, pursuing his studies first at the Bristol Medical School, then at the London Hospital, being graduated from the latter institution after five years' study. Before his death Dr Fletcher was the oldest living graduate. He was made a member of the Royal College of Surgeons of England and of the London Society of Apothecaries in 1844.

In 1843 Dr Fletcher married Miss Hannah Howe of Bristol, and three children were born: Arthur Henry Fletcher, Lieutenant, U. S. N.; Robert Howe Fletcher, Captain, U. S. A., and Catherine Agnes Fletcher, the wife of general Leon A. Matile, U. S. A. Dr Fletcher's wife died at Washington, January 20, 1889.

Dr Fletcher came to the United States and settled at Cincinnati, Ohio, in 1847, where he practised his profession. At the outbreak of the Civil War he entered the service of the United States and spent two years in active duty in the field as Surgeon of the First Ohio Volunteers. He was then commissioned as Surgeon, U. S. Volunteers, and given charge of military hospital No. 7, at Nashville, Tennessee. Later he was appointed Medical Purveyor. At the close of the war he was